

**Ad Hoc Group on Digital and A-Frame Signs
Meeting #1 Notes
June 3, 2015**

Group Members Present:

Nate Macek (Chair), Fernando Torrez, Carol Supplee, Danielle Romanetti, Peter Smeallie, Pete Benavage, Jay Nestlerode, Mike Porterfield, Bill Blackburn, Barbara Belmont, Lynn Bostain, Steve Milone, Charles Sumpter

Staff present:

Alex Dambach, Nancy Williams, Kristen Walentisch, Curtis Rowlette

Group Members Absent:

Pat Miller, Amy Rutherford, Lillian Chao-Quilan

Presentation:

There was a brief presentation about the zoning regulations pertaining to signage in general. The presenter, Mr. Dambach, emphasized that much of this overall signage project relates to the types of signs the City does *not* allow, especially portable signs, animated signs, and flashing signs.

A-frame Signage Topic:

The presentation included information about the King Street A-frame Program, which is a wayfinding program to alert King Street pedestrians of businesses on side streets. It then focused on the situation of individual stores setting up A-frame signs in front of their businesses, which is currently against regulations largely because portable signs are prohibited. The City is enforcing this prohibition on a complaint basis, but the question of this signage project is whether these types of signs should be permitted instead of prohibited. The benefits of storefront A-frame signs are that they help small businesses survive, help customers find open stores and restaurants, and can add 'charming' street furniture. The drawbacks are that they can add clutter and a jumbled appearance and are an alleged tripping hazard, although there are no documented incidents of people tripping on these. The presentation also discussed other cities that do and do not permit A-frame signs.

The following questions were presented to facilitate discussion:

- Is there confusion from the city allowing side street businesses to jointly use A-Frame signs, but businesses fronting on King Street, Mt. Vernon Avenue, and other shopping streets being prohibited from using these signs?
- Can A-Frame signs for individual business co-exist with other sidewalk street furniture without creating tripping hazards and clutter?
- Can appropriate design restrictions enable A-Frame signs to be used in historic areas?

- Would allowing businesses to place A-Frame signs in front of their businesses create a chaotic effect?

During the presentation, there were questions about regulating what is put on a sign. It was acknowledged that the King Street A-Frame Program (wayfinding) only permits the names of the businesses. One member stated that regulating what is put on signs may be important because of incidents of inappropriate content on signs in the past. It was also stated that ‘time, place, and manner,’ are the primary purview of signage regulation. A member also stated that the purpose of the original wayfinding program when it was created was for the signs only for wayfinding, rather than advertising.

Digital Signage Topic:

Regulations on digital signs were spearheaded after schools began installing digital signs (TC Williams, Old Town Theatre). Although the Zoning Ordinance prohibits digital animated signs, the City has permitted frozen, digital signs that do not have flashing or changing letters/animation.

The following questions were presented to facilitate discussion:

- Are there beneficial uses for electronic/digital signs in Alexandria?
- Can current prohibitions of animated or flashing signs adequately address inappropriate versions of these signs?
- Are amendments necessary to accommodate institutional uses such as schools, MetroRail, parking garages, etc?
- Is it appropriate to make allowances for businesses to use these signs in Alexandria?

Group Roundtable Discussion on Presentation:

There was a facilitated discussion after the presentation. Each Group member took a turn to speak. No members of the public were present.

Ms. Bostain said she did not have major concerns about the current uses of A-frame signs in front of businesses, but she could understand the cause for concern. She also expressed a need to discuss the issue of signage directing people to businesses at other locations.

Mr. Torrez suggested we get rid of the notion that A-frame signs are a tripping hazard. He explained that storefront A-frame and wayfinding A-frame signs are important to business and added that the signs should be regulated for inappropriate materials. He mentioned that the signs are not cheap, and that there should be guidance for businesses to use these signs so that they are not in violation of the Ordinance. He thinks we should allow the signs for all businesses, but that the City should also do better on enforcing regulations of these signs.

Ms. Supplee expressed concern about the clutter but acknowledged that safety may not be an issue. She said she spoke to one shop owner about his illegal sign, and the owner told her that the A-frame sign

really works for attracting customers. She gave the example of a store promoting 'free coffee' on its sign as a way to draw in customers. She stated she has mixed feelings because as a business owner she wants to put out a sign as well if everyone else is doing it. She also said that if the City determines that the signs should all be uniform, the City would be infringing upon the creativity of business owners. Signage is effective, but it can cause clutter. She thinks portable signage has become overdone.

Ms. Romanetti stated that she is a shop owner who had her business listed on an A-frame wayfinding sign. When she moved her business to another Old Town location, it was difficult to get her business off of the A-frame wayfinding sign, and temporarily having her name on the sign where she was no-longer located negatively affected her business. As a former store owner on an off-street (not King Street) location, she is a big advocate of the wayfinding signs but believes that they are too heavily regulated. She said temporary messages written on signs are extremely effective on bringing in foot traffic (she gave an example of her posting signs about her knitting classes). She also raised the issue of regulations that curtail special advertising (promoting a product or service that provides less than 50% of business revenue) on signs, and said she was told special advertising would be prohibited on her signage.

Mr. Smeallie began by discussing the situation from a City official standpoint, as a former Board of Architectural Review member. He stated the City was founded on simplicity in its architecture, and it is important for Old Town to keep its ambiance simple and traditional. He asked the Group to keep in mind that all of the tourists that come to Alexandria are here to experience the charm of Old Town, which is what makes it special. He thinks A-frame signs add clutter to a city that emphasizes simplicity. With that said, he thinks there should be a matter of balance to promote businesses without producing clutter and having Alexandria look like Times Square. He is opposed to encroachment into the public right-of-way by any A-frame sign. He stated he understands that businesses need to be represented and good signage is effective. He also said if the City is fair to one, then it must be fair to all. He stated the need for finding other creative ways for businesses to get the signage that they need.

Mr. Benavage stated that all signs are advertising, whether it is done directly or indirectly. Direct advertising, for example, would be the displaying menu items in front of a certain restaurant, while indirect would be simply advertising that the merchant's shop exists and is around the corner. The City should offer permits for businesses to obtain A-frame signs in front of their stores but with restrictions on number of signs, size, time, composition, design context, etc. The 'A-frame' style implies that the sign is temporary, as it would be removed when the business is closed. He said that materials should not be regulated. He discussed how old Town merchants historically have had similar signs along the colonial streets. He also argued that the City should regulate how many signs are allowed to be posted in order to keep down clutter on the streets. What is good for one neighborhood isn't necessarily good for another (Old Town is different from the West End). He added that in the not-too-distant future there will probably be digital A-frame signs. He suggested that the regulations need to be different in every neighborhood of the City.

Mr. Nestlerode said there should be regulations on where the signs are placed on the sidewalk, in order to keep in compliance with ADA regulations. Others stated that the physical layout of Old Town make it very difficult (regardless of A-frame signs) to travel there by wheelchair.

Mr. Porterfield stated there shouldn't be restrictions on *what* the signs are advertising. Another member pointed out that the restriction on special advertising was created so stores would not have political slogans on the signs. He said A-frame signs don't offend him now, but if they are legalized and every store got one, then Old Town would look like all the other cities and counties in the area, making Alexandria less distinguishable. He asked another member, a business owner, if window advertising in lieu of storefront A-frame signs would be more helpful. That business owner stated that such advertising is not an option, because it is considered special advertising. Staff clarified that the regulations on signs allow, but limit the size of area for, special advertising city-wide, but in the historic districts the regulations are stricter than in the rest of the city, and special advertising is discouraged. As an example, Austin Grill's sign had to have smaller letters for the portion of its sign that says "and Tequila Bar," because that is a minor part of its business.

Mr. Blackburn said he is in favor of storefront A-frame signs, but they need to be regulated. He asked about regulations for A-frame signs used by churches, community associations, etc. Staff responded that these are not permitted, but complaints have not been received.

Mr. Sumpter supports the use of storefront A-frame signs, but thinks the City should further regulate them. Coming from the West End, he thinks businesses need the opportunity to promote themselves with their advertising. He also called attention to signage for districts such as Eisenhower West, which may aim to have a unique identity.

Ms. Belmont thinks the integrity and appearance of Old Town are most important. But at the same time, the City needs to support local businesses. The solution might not have anything to do with A-frame signs. She mentioned her experience traveling abroad as an example of how important wayfinding signs are, because Old Town gets so many foreign tourists. She suggested a new type of permanent wayfinding signs on King Street where the business name could be interchangeable so these signs could be easily updated.

Mr. Milone pointed out businesses that have put out A-frame signs that do not follow the wayfinding program, such as Fontaine Caffe & Creperie, which started putting out an A-frame sign before the King Street A-frame Sign Program was even launched. He said the City needs enforce the rules. It also needs to establish what it is/isn't going to allow. The group needs to think about what makes the City special. He said A-frame signs are mostly now a way that businesses just compete with each other. He mentioned that Georgetown does not have A-frame signs, and its Business Improvement District has installed decorative fixtures such as hanging flower baskets, which improve the aesthetics of there. In Old Town the sidewalks are so narrow, and he cannot even walk up King Street with his family because of the signs and other clutter. He made reference to a provision in the Zoning Ordinance that allows temporary signs. However, he believes a brainstorming committee won't do any good as long as the City doesn't enforce the regulations. He finished by suggesting the City buy permanent signs for wayfinding that are updatable.

Mr. Macek believes that the information provided on A-frame signs is beneficial, and he supports finding appropriate regulations. The challenge is finding the right regulations for materials, location, and

appearance in general. Location should be sighted in relation to trees, outdoor dining, etc. There should be a permit fee associated with using storefront A-frame signs. Outdoor dining in Old Town takes up far more space than an A-frame sign. The key is finding a regulatory balance that is best for the public right-of-way. He claims he counted 20 A-frame signs in 4 blocks one day on lower King Street, so they are already widely used. He also likes the idea of changable messages for the wayfinding signage. Mr. Macek is also in favor of city-sponsored signs, and he proposes to remove the wayfinding signs from the sidewalk corners at intersections, because it's the busiest section of the sidewalk. The City needs to do a better job of enforcement before any sort of change happens to the current policy.

Mr. Porterfield suggested the idea of businesses using a hanging sign that can be taken down with allowance for changeable messages and advertising.

Ms. Romanetti said she favors allowing storefront A-frame signs that are regulated, and the City needs to establish a proper wayfinding program.

Mr. Benavage asked how many businesses are eligible for the wayfinding program, but are not participating.

City staff brought the Group's attention to the Design Guidelines for the wayfinding A-frame program.

Mr. Torrez pointed out that if it becomes legal and easy for all businesses to obtain an A-frame sign, there would be signs every 10 feet, which would make the signs that are listed on the wayfinding signs less important because the signs would be so small and just cause more clutter, but he said if the current ones are removed, business will decline.

Mr. Nestlerode pointed out that only qualified businesses are eligible to be on a corner wayfinding sign.

Mr. Torrez also asked about signage for 2nd and 3rd story businesses and their needs.

Mr. Milone thinks the Group and City staff should be thinking about what the City can do to regulate signs that are in violation now, instead of brainstorming for future policy. Regulation must come first.

Ms. Romanetti says that legalizing the signs would lead to signs of better quality on the streets because businesses will want to invest more in them.

Mr. Torrez claimed once you remove a sign off the ground, the business will lose customers.

Ms. Romanetti made reference to the Paper Source's A-frame sign, claiming that it is not tacky and is instead fashionable and classy. She also pointed out that we cannot change existing regulations on wayfinding programs because businesses on side streets will be affected by the loss of investment they made in the existing signs.

Meeting Takeaways:

The Chair and members reached consensus that there are four major items that emerged from this meeting that serve as the 'path forward' on the A-frame signage component of the project:

1. Explore better pedestrian-oriented wayfinding alternatives for businesses located off King Street.
2. If A-frame signs at storefronts are found appropriate and permissible, there should be regulations on size, material, lateral sidewalk clearance, color, time limits, limits on number of signs, locational context (historic vs. non-historic districts/Board of Architectural Review considerations), permitting, and content.
3. If A-frame signs continue to not be allowed at storefronts, there needs to be an explanation as to why these would not be permitted
4. There needs to be exploration of what alternatives are available for businesses to get the marketing benefits A-frame signs provide. Out of the box thinking is needed.

Next Steps:

Staff will research business participation in the wayfinding program and determine how many businesses would likely use A-frame signs both on and off of King Street. Staff will also conduct research and reach out to other cities regarding the 4 takeaways for the next meeting.